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ABSTRACT

This study explored the motivations of six female doctoral students in education to examine why they were entering higher education. The students were all doctoral candidates in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University. Participants related, in their own words, the experiences that led them to pursue higher education. The interviews followed a protocol established for the study and results were subject to member checks and content analysis. Findings included the following: (1) none of the participants thought of the world of academia as male dominated; (2) all participants had experience working in public education; (3) two of the six were happy with the positions they had been in before they returned to Texas A&M and four had been dissatisfied either because their career demanded skills they felt they needed to acquire or teacher burnout; (4) individual circumstances for each student led them to pursue a doctoral degree including the doctoral degree as a long-standing career goal, convenience with regard to family demands, or professional connections; (5) most felt they were not appreciated for their work as teaching or research assistants; and (6) nearly all planned to continue their careers working in higher education. (JB)

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WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

A CASE STUDY

by

Mike Desiderio

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WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

A CASE STUDY

A FAIRY TALE

Once upon a time in a land where the Eagle(s) Pass, there lived a male teacher/coach. This teacher/coach was there to help young boys become men. He was like most of his coaching colleagues, believing women had a place in society. This place just happened to be barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen.

However, most of this man's teaching colleagues were women. Oh, he did not begrudge women a place in the teaching profession. After all, times were hard and families had to have money to live on. So this teacher/coach understood that of those women who were married, most were in the profession to supplement their family's income.

He also did not mind women who were unmarried being teachers either. After all, everyone in the land of Eagle(s) Pass knew that single female teachers were there only until they could meet a man and start a family. And if they stayed in the teaching profession after they found their man, it was only to provide additional income for their family.

For a woman in the land of Eagle(s) Pass to say she was working out of dedication to a profession, or because it was intellectually stimulating, was unheard of. After all, every one in this land knew that women were not naturally intelligent and talented. In this fairy tale, women would rather watch Soaps, gossip and exchange recipes.

At the end of each day, this teacher/coach would go home, and find his barefoot and pregnant wife in the kitchen, lovingly preparing his dinner. He would sit down and relax in his easy chair from which he would reflect on his day. He had helped bring his young athletes one step closer to manhood. His regular students had enjoyable learning experiences in his class. His wife was home, doing and being what a wife should do and be. Yes he thought, everything was right in the land of Eagle(s) Pass. (Or was it?)

The constructs of this teacher/coach led me to questions concerning the role of women in education. I was intrigued by females who wanted to enter academia, a field traditionally dominated by males. So I began an inquiry to discover why women were entering a field that has been traditionally male dominated.

INTRODUCTION

As I was working on my Master's Degree at Sul Ross State University, Uvalde Center, I noticed all of my course work was completed under male professors. The majority of my classmates were also male, looking to enter the world of public school administration.

When I decided to begin work on a Ph.D. I was invited to Texas A&M University to interview. I completed the interview process with eight other candidates in November 1993. I was the only male candidate. Upon entering TAMU this past summer, I again noticed a majority of the faculty that I was associated with were male. Thirty of the forty-four professors on the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction Fall 1994 faculty roster were male. Yet I have found that the majority of the graduate and teaching assistants in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction are female. As of the Fall Semester, 1994, out of a total of twenty-eight graduate assistants only five are male. As a result I, a 38 year old male doctoral student and teaching assistant at TAMU, became interested in understanding why women were entering the field of higher education.

RESPONDENTS

I interviewed six female doctoral students in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction. I had (have) a cordial, as well as, professional relationship with each of these women. These respondents were (are): Sally, Marie, Kimberly, Grace, Gill, and Emily (all pseudonyms).

SALLY

Sally is my buddy. When I look at her I see the girl next door, only better. When she walks into a room it immediately brightens up. Sally has this infectious smile; you can't help but smile when she is there. As you begin to talk with Sally, you get caught up in her enthusiasm. I find I just can't help but enjoy the work I am doing when I am in her presence.

I have also found Sally to be the strongest woman I have ever met. She is intelligent, strong willed, opinionated, and stubborn. She is not willing to compromise when she feels she is right. However, I have found her to be teachable, willing to listen to and learn from her peers. Sally is not afraid to be herself.

MARIE

When I first met Marie, I did not like her. I found her to be flighty and whimsical. She had all the

attributes of my constructs of a "Valley Girl." The only reason I interviewed her was because it was convenient for me.

As a result of the interview, my judgment of Marie changed dramatically. I found her to be totally opposite from my initial expectations. This interview was the first time I experienced Marie as an intelligent, attractive human being. She is demanding, assertive, powerful, and interesting. Marie is a very complex person.

Marie is a private person. I feel privileged she shared with me a part of her life that few have seen. Her sharing this portion of her life touched a part of my soul. Only two other women in my life have been able to touch this part of me. I can no longer look at Marie in the way I once did. I came away from this interview a changed person.

KIMBERLY

Kimberly is the sister I never had. Since I have been at TAMU, Kimberly has become an extended member of my family. We have taken several courses together. We work together. We have done (and do) many activities together.

Kimberly has a bubbly personality. She is a fun loving single. She is assertive, yet accommodating. She is professional in her demeanor, yet willing to become

personal with her students and peers. Kimberly and I share similar perspectives on many issues.

GRACE

Grace is an energetic, sensitive person with a sharp mind and quick wit. She has an easy smile and warm personality. She is also very conservative in nature. I have heard her tell me on many occasions, "Now Mike, you know that I am just to the left of Genghis Khan."

Grace always has a kind word to say about everyone. She has deep conservative Christian convictions. These convictions are evident in all areas of her life that I have observed. She talks the talk and walks the walk.

GILL

Gill is a feminist with an attitude. She is extremely intelligent, and has an opinion about everything. She is articulate and enjoys challenging people on their beliefs. (Lord knows, I love a challenge.) When I talk to Gill, I find I have to be careful. She has told me on more than one occasion that statements I have made could be construed as sexist.

I have noticed that Gill is a very private person. I have found that she does not like to talk about her personal life. However, Gill will share parts of herself to benefit those around her. I also have noticed that Gill

likes to joke with people, especially if she is in control. When she is not in control, she will put up a fuss, but have a big smile on her face.

EMILY

In every sense of the word Emily fits my constructs of a "Barbie Doll." It has been my experience that Emily speaks differently to men and women. When she speaks to me, a male, her voice is soft, and she has a knack of getting her female attributes noticed. For instance, she flips her hair while she talks and moves to show the contours of her body. When I have observed her speaking to women, her voice and posture change. She speaks in more even tones, does not flip her hair, and her stance becomes neutral.

She is intelligent, well organized, and perceptive. She goes after what she wants, and does not let anything get in her way. She is a very graceful person with a warm smile.

BEGINNING A NATURALISTIC INQUIRY

I asked these women to relate, in their own words, the experiences that brought them to pursue higher education at Texas A&M University. Through our conversations, I wanted to learn about the decisions and circumstances that led them to enroll at TAMU. I also wanted to learn about their

expectations for their own future in higher or public education once they leave the graduate program. Therefore, on January 18, 1995 I developed a protocol with the assistance of Dr. Yvonna Lincoln. This protocol included the following questions:

- Why would you as a woman consider entering a profession (academia) that has been traditionally male dominated?
- What was your job history before you decided to become a doctoral student at TAMU?
- How did you feel about what you were doing before entering TAMU?
- How did your job history prompt you to come back for an advanced education?
- What were the things that made you decide to seek a doctoral degree?
- How do you see your work as teaching assistant/graduate assistant?
- What are your future plans once you obtain this degree, and why?

As interviews were conducted, responses of the interviewees led to additional probing questions. For instance, after each interview, I evaluated the questions I asked. I found that they were open-ended enough to allow the respondents to tell their stories, yet still allowed me, the researcher, to ask additional questions. As a result, the stories the females told could be woven together to tell a common narrative.

These interviews were conducted over a three week period during the months of January and February 1995. Two of the interviews were conducted at the homes of the women [Sally & Emily]. The other four interviews were conducted in one of the third floor offices in Harrington. The shortest interview session I conducted was 45 minutes in length [Grace]. The longest interview session lasted just over two hours [Sally]. I took extensive field notes to record each woman's responses to the questions I asked during the interview.

MEMBER CHECKS & CONTENT ANALYSIS

Following each interview session, I typed the questions I asked along with each female's response. I then presented a copy of this to the respondent and told them that they could change, delete, or add anything they felt like to the interview. Only one respondent made no changes [Grace]. One respondent made extensive changes [Sally]. All other respondents made only minor changes that helped clarify their responses.

After all changes were made, I gave each female a copy of her interview for final approval. Only after receiving approval from all respondents regarding their interview, did I begin a content analysis by unitizing data on 3" by 5" rail cards.

Data from each interview were reduced to meaningful units so it could be sorted and categorized. During the sorting and resorting process, new categories emerged. Some of these categories that emerged were not a direct result of the protocol. This phenomenon is consistent with the beliefs and assumptions of present day researchers doing emergent design and naturalistic inquiry.

VOICES

Male Domination of Academia

The first question I asked each woman dealt with why they wanted to enter a profession that had traditionally been male dominated. Each respondent had different reasons for wanting to enter academia. However, none of them thought of academia as being male dominated. For example, Emily said, "I never thought of it that way. I got into education because I love school. I always had the idea of teaching college as a goal."[Emily-1] Marie told me that "It was something I wanted to accomplish."[Marie-1] Gill related that "I enjoy doing challenging things."[Gill-1]

Sally had a unique reason for not thinking about the male dominance of academia that emerged out of a different area of our conversation. She stated:

> I have had powerful minds and models to help keep me questioning. Come to think of it, these models for the most part were female. Donna Wiseman, Yvonna Lincoln, Gaile Cannella... have all had a powerful impact on my thinking and learning. I guess that is why your male

dominance didn't register with me. Although many men lead the study in this college, my last years have been spent learning from these intelligent, incredibly powerful women who have and continue to make a difference. I'm not saying that the men are any less influential. I couldn't. I haven't had many of them.[Sally-6]

Work History

Each one of the women I interviewed had some experience working in public education. Grace had 20 years of experience teaching math and science in the same school district.[Grace-1] Marie and Kimberly each taught for 18 years. Marie taught middle school and high school science in two different school districts.[Marie-1-2] Kimberly taught middle school and high school social studies in seven different school districts. She explains her movement by saying, "I never stayed in one place too long. You get stale that way."[Kimberly-1-2] Kimberly also related that she had taught several junior college courses. [Kimberly-1] Sally taught ten years at the elementary level.[Sally-2] Emily taught four years at the elementary level.[Emily-1] Gill worked as a substitute teacher in the elementary grades.[Gill-1]

Emily, Sally and Gill have also held education positions outside of the classroom. Emily served as a gifted and talented specialist for The Texas Education Service Center, Region 12 for two years and as an assistant

high school principal for one year.[Emily-1] Sally served as a curriculum coordinator in her school district. [Sally-2] Gill served as an education specialist in the area of dropout prevention at the Texas Education Agency.[Gill-1-2]

Feelings Towards Previous Professional Experiences

When I asked each woman how they felt about what they were doing before entering TAMU, only two [Emily and Gill] related that they enjoyed their positions. Emily stated, "I liked each of the jobs I had."[Emily-2] Gill told me that her job(s) were, "...on target, worth while, enlightening and broadening. I would not change anything I have done."[Gill-2]

The other four women expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with their positions. Sally, an administrator and Kimberly, a classroom teacher, both expressed that they were frustrated with their positions. Sally stated that her frustration came about because,

> I do not have the skills I need to work successfully with people espousing so many different beliefs. I left because there was so much rhetoric about restructuring, empowerment, parent involvement, school improvement, yet people would not let go of their power. I became frustrated. I needed to learn how to actualize the rhetoric. So, I came back to school. [Sally-3]

Kimberly expressed that the reason for her frustration was,

> I think that the general public and school districts are asking too much of the classroom teacher, and they are not providing enough support.[Kimberly-2]

Marie expressed that, "teaching is a high stress position for me."[Marie-2] When I asked her to explain this further, she responded,

> I feel I put too much time and effort into my teaching. I wanted my students to have the best of the best. I wanted them to have fun experiences. I put too much of myself into it -- I got tired. And people expected it to continue because of my past performances. This caused a problem for me.[Marie-2]

Grace expressed that she was "burned out."[Grace-2] She believed that her philosophy of teaching lead to "micro management of my classes (by school administrators)." [Grace-2] She further contends, "I am convinced I was singled out because I was a female."[Grace-2]

An emerging point that I found interesting was that for all the problems with their individual positions, these respondents expressed a love for teaching. I believe Marie expressed it best when she said, "I loved teaching, I still do."[Marie-2]

Back to School for an Advanced Degree

The respondents had a difficult time relating how their job histories prompted them to come back for an advanced education. It seemed that so much of their personal lives were intertwined with their professional lives. This is also where I really began to see the respondents answers emerge in other parts of our conversations.

Two respondents [Marie and Emily] talked about personal changes or problems that lead to their coming to TAMU. Grace talked about a disagreement over teaching with her school administrators that prompted her to come back to school.[Grace 1-2]

When Grace talked about this problem, I could see the hurt in her eyes. I could hear the hurt in her voice. I let her talk about it for as much as she felt comfortable. However, when she finished, I did not push on this topic any further. I did not like hearing and seeing the hurt this woman felt.

Sally also had problems with administrators. She related, "It seems the better I got at my job, the more threatened people in power got."[Sally-3] The difference I observed between Sally and Grace was that Sally got mad, not hurt.

During this interview, three of the respondents, Kimberly, Sally & Grace, related that they wanted to make a difference for kids by getting an advanced education. Grace explained, "I found that I needed credentials to persuade people to change in ways that would help children."[Grace-1] Sally stated, "I entered the profession -- teacher education -- because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children."[Kimberly-1] Kimberly said, "I hope the advanced degree will help me

understand what it is the experts are trying to do in education."[Kimberly-3]

There were two respondents [Emily and Gill] that were sure they would be seeking a Ph.D. before they started their careers in education. Emily and Gill both made several statements during their interviews to.this fact.

> I had always wanted to pursue a Ph.D.; I knew this before I started working[Gill-2]. These experiences (in secondary school) lead me to expect to pursue the highest degree available. It is part of my psyche, my demeanor[Gill-3].
>
> I always had the idea of teaching college as a goal[Emily-1]. I always had the doctoral degree as an ultimate goal[Emily-2].

Why I'm Seeking a Doctoral Degree

The respondents had an easier time talking about what drove them to seek a doctoral degree. Each respondent talked about her individual circumstances. Sally said that she originally wanted to move into higher levels of school administration. However, "Now I'm not so sure (that this is what I want to do)."[Sally-5] Marie and Grace both expressed that they like to do reading, research and writing.[Grace-2, Marie-3] Marie also stated that she likes taking classes and teaching.[Marie-3]

Kimberly said, "I need to know more." "I did not want to go on to administration." "Hopefully I can bring reality to what teaching is like today."[Kimberly-3]

Emily and Gill again talked about how seeking the doctoral degree was something they always wanted to do. Emily also talked about how she needed the graduate assistantship to be able to pursue "my eventual goal."[Emily-3]

Respondent's children were also a concern for both Emily and Marie. Emily related that the flexibility of her assistantship allows her to take care of her child. [Emily-3] Marie was able to leave her children at home in South Texas with their father.[Marie-3]

Another emerging point related by each respondent involved why they chose to attend TAMU. In the case of Emily and Kimberly, they both bleed maroon and white (they previously graduated from A&M whose school colors are maroon and white). In the case of Gill, she wanted to stay close to her family, but did not want three degrees from the University of Texas.[Gill-1] Marie said, "A&M accepted me and U.T. (University of Texas) lost my paperwork." [Marie-3] In the cases of Grace and Sally, they were both recruited by A&M faculty whom they had previously worked with in University--School collaborative efforts.[Grace-2, Sally-4]

Working as Graduate Assistants

When the respondents talked about their assistantships, I learned that Emily was the only one with

no teaching responsibility. She is a research assistant. She describes her assistant ship as follows:

> Mine is flexible, so I feel real fortunate. I am learning about writing and children's literature. I know that I will need the teaching assistant experiences. I also know that it will increase my responsibilities. Some of my duties right now are secretarial.[Emily-3]

All of the other respondents reported that they place great value on their teaching assistantship experience. For example Gill relates it to be "a wonderful challenge and experience."[Gill-3] Grace reflects that:

> It pulls in every experience I have had. It allows me to prove whether or not the research I have done work. It is the synthesis of my research experience. [Grace-3]

Marie takes Grace's thoughts on step further when she says, "The course I teach is uniquely mine. It is a reflection of what I do."[Marie-3]

However, the respondents that teach related that they did not believe they were appreciated. For example, Sally said, "First I had to get over some of the initial shocks at becoming a lowly teaching assistant."[Sally-5] Sally further expressed that she sees the teaching aspect of academia as being minimized. Kimberly agrees with Sally's assessment when she points out that "70% of the undergraduate students are taught by T/As."[Kimberly-2] Kimberly goes on to point out that because of her

experience as a public school teacher, "I can bring them (undergraduates) the reality of the classroom."[Kimberly-2]

Also the teaching respondents had something to say about the salary (or rather the lack of it) they received for instructing undergraduates in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction. Grace sums it up best when she said, "Financially I have not been treated well, but this is consistent with education everywhere." [Grace-3]

Future Plans

Another topic that emerged throughout several of the conversations I had with the respondents involved their future plans once they obtain the degree. Emily stated at the beginning of our conversation, "I always had the idea of teaching college as a goal."[Emily-1] She also discussed seeking an administrative position when she said, "I would also be interested in working with students outside of academic life. Something like student affairs, student organizations, intramural, housing, etc."[Emily-3]

Kimberly said "I never wanted to leave the classroom."[Kimberly-3] She feels that her teaching assistant position "keeps me in the classroom, just with bigger kids."[Kimberly-3] Kimberly later elaborated about what would be the best job for her:

> I would like to go to a tier II university like University of Texas at San Antonio or A&M

> Stephenville. I'd like to teach teacher education classes and work with public schools in a collaborative program. I don't want the pressure of publications. I want to be a practitioner more than a researcher.[Kimberly-4]

Marie told me early in our conversation, "I am looking forward to finishing the degree and teaching college." [Marie-3] She later stated that she would like to "find a good sized university, teach teacher education, work as a liaison between science and education, and do research on how teachers learn."[Marie-4] She further stated that she would like to teach at the University of Texas, "But I will go where I get the best offer."[Marie-4] However, Marie qualifies this later by saying, "I don't think I want to go where it snows and stays around awhile."[Marie-4]

Gill told me early in our conversation, "I had always wanted to pursue a Ph.D.; I knew this before I started working."[Gill-2] So it was no surprise when Gill later stated:

> I would like to get more experience and practice as a professor. I want to do this because I will be qualified to be one, but more importantly I will be in a position to have an impact on younger minds. I will be able to share what I have learned.[Gill-3-4]

Grace did not particularly talk about what she was interested in doing until I brought up the subject. She told me, I want to teach at a research institution somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line."[Grace-3] When I

asked Grace to explain why she wanted to work at a research institution, she responded:

> Because looking at teacher education schools, they are still perpetuating the norms. Research institutions are not as static as normal schools. I want a marriage of research and practice.[Grace-3]

It was interesting for me to discover that for these five respondents, the South was/is their first choice in location for a job. Gill may have put best for these respondents when she said, "I shuddered over the fact of moving to a cold weather area."[Gill-2]

I saved writing about Sally for last because she seems a bit confused about what she wants to do.

> At first I came here ... with the idea in mind that I needed to be a principal or superintendent, so I picked up the mid-management certificate. However, now that I have been teaching undergraduates, I'm not exactly certain what I want to do.[Sally-7-8]

Sally goes on to discuss that she would like her future job to bring "perspective teachers together with public schools so that both could inform the others learning."[Sally-8] Sally continues talking about working in collaboration with public schools and their teachers:

> I want to continue working with these undergraduates, this public school, and build a place where people conduct their own research to help improve schools and education. ... I don't have to leave this town to do good work. Unfortunately the system won't allow me to stay. Who knows what I might do.[Sally-9]

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

When I started this paper, I knew what I was going to find. After all, I was a professional educator. I had worked with and supervised women for years. I was acquainted with each of the women I interviewed; not to mention I was going through similar circumstances., For example, I, like the respondents, was a public school educator turned graduate student/teaching assistant. I expected and found similarities in the way we saw our studies, working conditions and salaries. However, I did not expect to find as much of a kinship as I had experienced with each the women I interviewed.

As my interviews progressed, I found there was continuing agreement between the respondents and myself in most areas of the inquiry. Many of their ideas, frustrations, constructs about teaching, and their professional aspirations were similar to mine.

I was also surprised by what I learned about Emily and Marie. Due to the constructs I had about these two women, I did not expect to find the professionalism, intelligence, and expertise they have. This interview process required me to reevaluate the way I judge women.

The last issue I was surprised by dealt with the way I looked at the marriage status of women in the profession. I had come to realize that teaching for the single women I

interviewed was not a place holding position until they "could find their man." Also, for the married women I interviewed, teaching was not just a job which enabled them to help supplement the family income. For these women, the education profession is a career where they demonstrate dedication, pride, and strength of character.

During the inquiry, I took a long look at myself. Had I actually held the stereotypes described in the fairy tale at the beginning of this paper? To a certain extent, I had to say "yes, I did." I needed to take some time and reflect on why I had believed these stereo types were factual representations of the true characteristics of the respondents. The answer I came up with was that I really did not know who I was. Once I learned about myself, I was able to see the respondents for who they were.

CONCLUSION: A FAIRY TALE REVISED

Once upon a time in a land where the Eagle(s) Pass, there lived a male teacher/coach. This teacher/coach was there to help all his students become self actualizing human beings. Many of his teaching and coaching colleagues, both male and female, held similar beliefs. Male and female students were loved and nurtured. Students were allowed to perform at their optimum levels.

After a hard day of instructing all his students, this teacher/coach would go to the baby-sitter's to pick up his

little girl, while his wife was continuing with her professional pursuits. This time alone with his daughter was important to this man. It allowed him to bond with her in a special way that seemed unimaginable just a few short years ago.

But today was a special day. This man was preparing to have his teaching colleagues over to discuss the implementation of interdisciplinary teaching strategies for the team they had formed. While seeing to the needs of his daughter, he made dinner for his colleagues and wife, prepared the house, and saw to his personal hygiene needs. "Now," he thought to himself, "I am prepared for my guests."

The meeting was a success. All the professional issues were addressed and planned for. Now with the guests on their way home, his daughter down for the evening, and his wife off pursuing her own career interests, this teacher/coach had a chance to reflect on his day. His colleagues just happened to be women. Two happened to be married. Two happened to be single. All happened to be dedicated professionals working to provide a stimulating environment for their students as well as for themselves.

Well, it is time to stop reflecting because his wife just drove up. So this teacher/coach gets out of his easy chair and makes his way to the kitchen. He lovingly

prepares to serve his wife dinner. As he kisses her on the cheek he thinks to himself, "Everything is right in the land of Eagle(s) Pass."

AUDIT TRAIL
KEY TO REFERENCES

To complete this case study, I used extensive field notes that were taken during each interview with each respondent. Every interview was returned to each respondent so that they could check it for factuality and clarity. All respondents gave me permission to use their interviews for this paper.

References are made to the pseudonym of the respondent, the page number where the response was given, and the unit card(s) it is recorded on. For example, [Sally-6;50] refers to the respondent Sally, her response as recorded on page six of my field notes and unit card number 50.